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Citation for published version:

Ecks, S 2017, 'Gas', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 311-312.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2017.1294232>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/00856401.2017.1294232](https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2017.1294232)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies on 19/06/2017, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/00856401.2017.1294232>

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Gas – Stefan Ecks

Gas is a keyword in conversations about ailments that can be physical, affective, social, and environmental. In popular health practices, gas is an air-like substance that originates from digestive processes loosely located in the stomach. A disturbance of digestion can lead to an excessive amount and movement of gas. When gas exerts pressure onto other parts of the body, it can produce a wide range of ailments. All sorts of bodily pains and disturbances can be retraced to gas traveling around the body, going "up," "down," "here," and "there." Gas going up and pushing against the head is a common etiology of headaches; gas going down and pushing against the sexual organs may explain semen loss (*dhat*); gas going here and there causes back pain, joint pain, or pain in the limbs: "all pain comes from the belly," as one saying goes. Any discomfort in the chest is often explained by reference to gas, and cardiologists say that they find it hard to convince patients that they are actually suffering from heart disease rather than from gas. Psychiatrists bemoan how often patients see digestive disturbances as the root cause of psychological problems. "All that gas comes from the head," they say.

The word "gas" was derived from Greek "chaos" by the seventeenth-century physiologist Jan van Helmont, who saw it as a kind of guiding spirit that is distinct from air. For van Helmont, gas was is not a byproduct of digestion, but a vital catalyzer of digestive fermentation. The South Asian word "gas" is of English origins but presents an amalgamation of meanings of the words gas (as in gaseous substance) and "gastric" ("relating to the stomach"). In its content, "gas" seems to be derived related to humoral ideas of the *vata dosha* in Ayurvedic theory: with wind, change, movement. Hence gas may sound like a term adapted from biomedicine, but instead it is rooted in traditional humoral pathology. The other two Ayurvedic doshas, *pitta* and *kapha*, are also part of popular notions of health and illness but do not seem to have transmogrified into English words to the same extent as gas. In doctor-patient consultations, gas is frequently mentioned by patients.

Seeing gas as a catch-all cultural idiom of distress, the doctors either ignore it, shrug it off ("don't confuse me with your very unscientific views!"), or tacitly exploit it to include a digestive tonic in their list of drugs prescribed. The huge range of digestive syrups and tablets sold in South Asian medicine shops point to a lucrative pharmaceutical trade. Assuming that gas expresses the somatization of psychological distress, doctors often prescribe anxiolytic and antidepressant medications without informing patients about the effects of these drugs. When a patient says gas, a doctor may hear "masked depression."

For allopathic doctors, complaints about gas are emblematic for patients' deplorable lack of education. They say that patients only had a rudimentary understanding of the insides of their bodies, that they were unable to discern the origins of their symptoms, and that they falsely assumed that "gas" and "gastric" were similar problems. Just as children complained about "belly aches" for any kind of distress,

so were uneducated patients complaining about gas. At the same time, the doctors still prefer "simple-minded" complaints about gas during consultations to "pseudo-educated" complaints about "dyspepsia" or "colitis," which were equally unscientific but harder to dispel.

In everyday conversations, there is nothing shameful or hidden about digestive processes. Instead they can be discussed and scrutinized openly with others, in almost any social context. Speaking about gas is as much about self-care as about care for others. Gas problems are open to be treated without any medical help through dietary changes and different daily regimes. Talk of gas can be used for the kind of comic effect familiar in the West since at least Rabelais (for a recent example from popular culture, see the movie *Piku*), but the care for the self and for close others is more important.

Complaints about gas may not only reflect mind-body distress but may also express social and environmental disturbances. Gas out of balance can stand for complaints about food: what kind of food, where it is eaten, when, how, and with whom. To suffer from gas can then mean to suffer from having to eat bad (stale, spoiled, unhealthy) food, too fast, in bad company, in bad places, at the wrong times. If one does not want to eat food offered, one can refuse by putting one's hands on the belly, pulling a sour face, and saying that one is suffering from gas. Disordered digestion can express one's unease about fast lifestyles, the stresses of urban life, and the spoiling of the soil through fertilizers and pollutants. Gas can also arise from drinking bad water or from breathing dirty air. At the same time, gas can also be caused by "greedy eating," which is both bad for its excess but also good for its partying celebration of gastric conviviality.

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